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ABSTRACT

The hypothesis that a communication professor's consulting activities in the "real world" improve his classroom instruction is largely unprovable. Perhaps this can be attributed to the complexity of the variables involved. It is possible, however, to identify striking similarities in the role of consultant and professor. The author outlines and discusses the strategies used in business and governmental consulting that may well be relevant to improving teaching in university courses in communication. Whether in the classroom or the marketplace, the consultant/professor is a facilitator of learning and a catalyst for change. His objective is to create a learning environment in which new ideas can be evaluated and assimilated. Since his roles as consultant and professor are consistent, his own learnings in one field are readily transferable to the other. Further, the consulting experience can be particularly useful in developing classroom tasks in simulated reality practice. Consulting activities have the potential for producing beneficial effects on teaching, and realization and utilization of this potential depends on the imagination and energy of the communications consultant-professor. (LG)

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Business and Governmental Consulting: Relevance for Improving University Courses in Communication

George T. Tade

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University students complain, at times justifiably, that senior professors spend too much time off-campus consulting with businesses and governmental agencies. Nonetheless, most colleges and universities permit faculty members to engage in consulting activities in their area of specialization on the hypothesis that a professor's consulting activities in the "real world" improve his classroom instruction. This hypothesis is largely unproved and is, perhaps, unproveable because of the complex variables involved; however, it is possible to identify: 1) similarities in the role of consultant and professor, and 2) strategies used in business and governmental consulting which may be relevant to improving teaching in university courses in communication.

I.

Fortunately, the consultant-professor of communication does not experience a problem of role identity or role conflict in shifting from the classroom to his work beyond the ivied walls. As consultant or as professor his goals are remarkably similar.

The industrial or governmental consultant usually begins with a careful analysis of the communication needs and problems of his client. Methods of determining these needs are varied but well known. Likewise the experienced teacher makes a determination of the probable future communication needs and problems of students. The more he has mingled the dust of the highway of commerce with the dust of the library, the better his estimate of students' future needs is likely to be. Whether in the marketplace or classroom, the consultant-professor, therefore, develops learning procedures based on an understanding of his clients' or students' present or anticipated communication needs.

Inexperienced or highly authoritarian consultants who "tell" clients how things should be done are appropriately few and short-lived professionally. Most consultants like most teachers perceive that it is difficult, if not impossible, to teach another person directly; they see themselves primarily as facilitators of the learning process. They are resource persons, the structurers of learning experiences, and the adapters of knowledge to needs. The latter function is of basic importance, since both clients and students learn <u>significantly</u> those things which they perceive as being most involved with maintenance or enhancement of their own understanding of self--either the highly personal self or the self as projected in career goals. Significant

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learning, i.e., learning that produces growth and involves change in the self, is the fundamental objective of both the consultant and professor.

The consultant recognizes that his presence in an industry or agency suggests that management is not satisfied--that change is desired. While new ideas and procedures may be immediately perceived by a client's employees as contributing to the enhancement of self, there is an even stronger probability that efforts to produce change will be threatening and may be resisted through denial or distortion. Psychologists have long understood the principle that the self under threat becomes rigid and less adaptable to change. The consultant's objective, therefore, is to create a learning situation in which new ideas, procedures, and experiences may be viewed as non-threatening, i.e., consistent with self-maintenance and enhancement. The consultant functions as a catalyst for change. This approach is possibly more prevalent among consultants than university professors, for some professors would contend that self-change or learning occurs because of threat. Even those who do not verbalize this point of view accept it as inherent in the university structure of status, evaluation, etc. Without arguing the point, still largely unproved in the educational field, one can suggest that the consultant functioning as a catalyst for change is an appropriate model for the communication professor to follow. At least, it is consistent with an understanding of the nature of human communication.

II.

Strategies for consulting and teaching in the field of communication are a direct outgrowth of the consultant-professor's concept of his role. If, as we have contended, he is primarily a facilitator of learning and a catalyst for change who creates a learning environment in which new ideas may be assimilated with a minimum of threat, then it follows that his strategies will be designed to facilitate new and objective perceptions in the field of his clients' or students' communicative activity. Some useful strategies include simulating reality and simulated reality practice.

In industry, strategies based on simulating reality raise immediate questions: Why not deal directly with the "real" problem? If the consultant is an authority, why doesn't he "tell" the client's employees what they need to do to improve their communication? Why play games when profits and futures are at stake? In many situations the consultant should address himself to real problems and make specific recommendations; however, where problems are emotionalized, require significant restructure, constitute threats to status, etc., an approach that simulates reality may be less threatening and more productive in helping employees gain new and objective perceptions of their field of communicative activity. Further, strategies based on simulating reality may be capable of promoting more general learnings which can be applied to solving future communication problems. Attacks on specific real problems may result in immediate solutions to those problems but, in my opinion, seldom in

more generalized learnings. Consider the matter of adequate reporting within the organizational structure. Telling an employee to report a certain type of problem to his superior may, at that point, improve communication; but it does not necessarily help the employee to make intelligent future decisions based on an understanding of the communication structure of his business or agency, the "need to know" concept, etc.

Strategies for simulating reality range from sophisticated computerized games to the more traditional case study. Nearly all of the strategies reflect the Dewey concept that education is the reconstruction of experience,[1] and most are dependent on the participants having some highly specialized knowledge. The latter fact may account for the frequency with which strategies for simulating reality first found their way into professional schools of law, medicine, business, etc.

No attempt will be made to detail the strategies available for simulating reality; however, many of the successful strategies used in communication consulting have common characteristics. The communication problem is posed within a simulated reality that is:

1) natural to the particular business, agency, etc.

2) reasonably specific.

3) within the frame of reference and concern of the participants.

4) capable of insuring a degree of identification and involvement with the problem.

5) open to interpretation.

6) designed to produce a consideration of several possible solutions with related consequences.

7) productive of insights which may be generalized to apply to future problems.

The above characteristics are as important in designing simulation strategies for the classroom setting as the marketplace.

As McDonald and Ricciardi point out in Fortune, success of simulated reality practice depends upon "the degree of participation of the players; how well the real world is represented by the model; and the application in real life of what is learned in the game . . . the criteria of success are involvement, adequacy, and transfer."[2]

Some of the more common methods of simulated reality practice include games for demonstrating cooperation, role awareness, efficiency of different communication networks, etc. Role playing is also of proven value especially in areas of reality practice where the goal is to achieve objectivity, anticipatory adjustment to role, role clarification and definition, role development and rehearsal, personalization of the abstract, etc.

The use of caselets, half-interviews, and projective methods are also effective but less frequently used procedures which deserve brief consideration. Caselets are short statements of communication problems designed to focus on a specific difficulty. The caselet is used as a point of departure for discussions by small groups on the nature and solution of the problem posed; however, the objective of the discussion is to produce more general insights which may be transferred to the solution of related problems.

A specific illustration may be useful. In a consulting seminar with a group of twenty-five to thirty legislative aides employed by Legislative Councils in several states, two types of communication problems were apparent. Most were having difficulty in knowing what types of information should be communicated and to whom, and there were also problems in handling midunderstandings, hostility, etc. Eight caselets focusing on these two problem areas were written, and the participants were divided into groups of three to five to discuss the caselets and the questions related to them. Each group was asked to select the caselet in which the majority had the greatest interest: The following caselets are representative:

1) Your Legislative Council is engaged in a major statutory review program. The Council contracted with an outside firm to do computer searches of your state's statutory compilation. The particular revisions for which you are responsible are due to be reported in two weeks. Information from the computer service which should have reached you in less than 86 hours is two days overdue. The supervisor from the service has just telephoned to tell you that because of a breakdown the data will not arrive for at least three more days.

2) One of your most promising young staff members comes into your office and quietly announces that he is going to quit at the end of the month. When pushed for his reasons, he tells you, "This job doesn't provide any opportunity to be creative. When I have a good idea, I don't even have time to think about it. Besides, there isn't anyone here that I respect except you. People always squelch my ideas for no reason at all. The only way you can get ahead here is to do the same old thing in the same old way!"

3) A legislative committee chairman for whom you have recently completed a report asks you to come to his office. It is obvious that he is agitated. He storms, "I don't understand you fellows. You are all alike! You write a kind of 'legalese' that no one can understand! Why can't you say what you mean in plain English?"

After a brief discussion on the cases, each group was asked to reach consensus answers to the following questions:

1. Should you report this problem to your superior? If not, should you report it horizontally? Downward? Should it go unreported?

2. With whom (if anyone) would you discuss this problem informally?

3. If you report to your superior, what will you do, if anything, before making the report?

4. What will you report?

5. How will you make your report? Formal? Informal? Oral? Written?

6. When will you report?

7. If objections or hostility are apparent, what can you do to remove the objections and reduce the hostility?

8. If misunderstandings are apparent, how may these be resolved?

9. If an explanation is requested, how can it best be provided?

10. What could be done to minimize or prevent similar problems of communication in the future? Would this be done by you or others?

Each small group then reported their case and defended the answers to the questions before the entire group. Following evaluation and further discussion, each group was invited to prepare an original caselet based on a problem from their own experience. The latter task was designed to get participants to generalize their learnings and move from simulated to real problems.

The caselet offers numerous possibilities for use in the classroom. By adapting the cases to the anticipated career objectives of students, the caselets can be used to focus on such diverse topics as interpersonal conflict in organizations, methods and procedures for reporting in an organization, informal and formal flow of information in a network, etc.

The half-interview is a modification of role playing procedure. Here the trainee is presented with a brief background statement of the case followed by only one side of an imaginary interview. The trainee is asked to respond to each statement in a fashion appropriate to his role and the specific training objective being studied. Each trainee's statement is then evaluated by the consultant and the trainee's peers.

The following excerpts from a half-interview on highway right of way negotiations are illustrative:

Mr. Black, the negotiator from the Texas State Highway Department, has just explained to the property owner, Mr. Jonnsen, that the

new highway construction will require a taking of 4,835 sq. feet from the rear of his yard. The property owner's garage and bleeder field from his cesspool system are included in the taking. The interview is in progress. Following the policy of his agency, Mr. Black has made the one offer he can make, $3,500. Mr. Jonnsen responds -- What would you say? How would you adapt to the owner's frame of reference?

Jonnsen: I don't find this a very pleasant subject at all to be discussing when you come up with an offer here, $3,500. To tell the truth, I'm no authority in these matters, but I want to know how you figured that. You term that just compensation and I want you to show me, item by item, how you derive a figure like that.

Black: (Your response must reflect the fact that you cannot give an item by item break of the $3,500 figure.)

Jonnsen: Well, you answered my question in part. I did ask for an item by item and you didn't give it. You must have reasons for it. Perhaps there are certain things you are not willing to reveal--You're taking about 1/4 of my land. What do you have for land value? Just the strip involved--what does it amount to?

Black:

Jonnsen: I don't want to appear to be obstinate, but I cannot be ignored when I make a reasonable request. I don't know what authority you have to come here in the first place. You don't seem to have the authority to talk to me.

Black:

Jonnsen: Now, you call yourself a negotiator. Is that what I understand?

Black:

Jonnsen: Well, if you are a negotiator let's try to negotiate. They should empower you to do something. You came to offer just one price. Maybe you're just an errand boy.

Black:

The half-interview serves some of the same purposes as role playing but with the advantage that it usually takes less time. The potential adaptability of the half-interview for use in classroom instruction is apparent.

Consultants are frequently involved in marketing and feasibility studies; and the skills employed here may find direct application in the

consultant's classroom teaching, particularly in devising projects which will force students to project themselves into possible real-life activities. My colleague, Professor F. H. Goodyear, has had considerable success in getting students to develop group projects which simulate marketing and feasibility studies. As a final project, small groups in one of his classes select a "product" for a major promotional campaign. It may be an old product not currently prospering, a product with a selective market which could be expanded, or an imaginary product. The "product" may be merchandise, a service, an institution, or an activity.

The groups are formed by mutual agreement and, after formation, are relatively autonomous, i.e., they can expel or add members, provide incentives, etc. Their task includes developing a detailed description of the product, selecting the audience for the promotional campaign, justifying the promotional objectives, selecting promotional strategies, determining manpower and production costs, justifying all cost in terms of values to the product, determining procedures for evaluating the campaign, writing the proposal in a clear and persuasive form, presenting the program to the class in preparation for a final presentation to an expert in the field who is selected in cooperation with the instructor, and, finally, securing the expert's evaluation of the proposal. While carrying out the project, each student evaluates the work of each member of his group every week and awards or withholds points toward the semester grade. Every student shares equally in the final project grade. In short, the project places the student in the position of a junior executive, i.e., he has restricted power to hire, fire, promote, raise "salary," and aid in the development of fellow workers; however, he does not control these factors alone--he is forced to cooperate for his own and the group's welfare.

Some of the more interesting and successful projects have involved the development of a plan for a campground near Arlington, Texas, which the banker-evaluator of the project liked so well he has now organized a group to construct it; a program to bring "big name" entertainment to Fort Worth, Texas, which station KXOL is now pursuing; and a publicity campaign for a townhouse complex which drew significant praise from a major advertising agency.

Projects for providing simulated reality practice, similar to Prof. Goodyear's, are not infrequently the spin-off of consulting activities. Such classroom projects can add depth and reality to instruction.

Conclusion

Although the hypothesis that a professor's consulting activities in the "real world" improves his classroom instruction remains unproved, there can be little doubt that consulting activities have the potential for producing beneficial effects on teaching. The role of the consultant-professor of communication is consistent whether in the classroom or marketplace. He is a facilitator of learning and a catalyst for change whose objective is to create a learning environment in which new ideas

can be evaluated and assimilated. Since his roles as consultant and professor are consistent, his own learnings in one field are readily transferrable to the other. Further, his experiences in consulting provide a broad range of "real" experiences which are relevant to teaching communication. These experiences can be particularly useful in developing strategies for simulating reality and for developing classroom tasks in simulated reality practice.

The conclusion that consulting can be beneficial to college instruction is certainly not new. More than a century ago, Emerson in his Phi Beta Kappa address at Harvard noted that the scholar must be involved in the real world. Emerson's position is well summarized by Ordway Tead.

> Let the teacher, I urge, get off campus and out of the library more often. The claim of the world upon the teachers of engineering, medicine, and education is eagerly acknowledged, and the rounds of duty immerse such teachers from time to time in their appropriate worlds of action. This should be true of all teachers on occasion. And the occasions can be created if the teacher wills it so. Opportunities to share variously in the world of affairs needs only some imagination and energy to be discovered.[3]

Notes

[1] John E. Colman, The Master Teachers and the Art of Teaching (New York: Pitman Publishing Company, 1967), p. 109.

[2] John McDonald and Franc Riccardi, "The Business Decision Game," Fortune, March, 1958, pp. 140, 214.

[3] Ordway, Tead, "The College Teacher in our Culture," in Improving College Instruction, ed. by Fred J. Kelly, Report of Committees and Conferences, American Council on Education Studies, vol. XV (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1951), p. 30.